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ABSTRACT

This document summarizes the key issues discussed at a "Listening Session" on the topic of alternative schools, held on December 8, 1998. The session was convened at the request of the Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, and included practitioners, researchers, administrators, policy makers, and teacher trainers from across the country who have had significant experience in the area of alternative schools and programs. Key issues included: (1) the importance of comprehensive efforts to prevent students from dropping out of school or behaving in a way that gets them kicked out; (2) the need for a continuum of alternative intervention ranging from close monitoring of a student's attendance to placement in a separate school designed to accommodate students whose behavior interferes with having a successful experience in school; and (3) the need for effective alternative intervention programs and for schools to employ qualified and caring staff who have specialized education and experience in the areas of preventive strategies and managing challenging behaviors, appropriate academic credentials, and a desire to work with the students in these settings. Barriers and challenges to effective alternative programs and schools are discussed, along with indicators of effectiveness. The document closes with a list of recommendations for federal support. (CR)

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Quick Turn Around Forum.
Issue: Alternative Schools.

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Quick Turn Around Forum

QTA - a brief analysis of a critical issue in special education

Issue: Alternative Schools **Date: March 1999**

Overview

This document is a summary of the key issues discussed at a *Listening Session* on the topic of Alternative Schools, held December 8, 1998. The session was convened at the request of the Secretary of Education, Richard Riley, by Project FORUM at the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE). This work was performed as part of Project FORUM's cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Special Education Programs (OSEP).

Background

Public concern about violence, drugs and weapons on school campuses balanced with concern about sending disruptive and potentially dangerous students "out to the streets" have spawned an increased interest in alternative programs and schools. At several recent events, including the *White House Conference on School Safety*, Secretary Riley drew public attention to the need for more alternative schools and programs for children and youth who have been suspended or expelled or who are at risk of suspension or expulsion for conduct problems. During the 1996-97 school year, for example, only 56 percent of the over 6,000 students expelled for firearm possession were referred to an alternative program (U.S. Department of Education, *Report on State Implementation of the Gun-Free Schools Act-School Year 1996-97.*)

The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) has a particular interest in the topic of alternative schools. Balancing the need for safe schools for all children and protection of the rights of children with disabilities to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and procedural safeguards, the 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act allows school personnel to order a change in placement to an *interim alternative educational setting* for a student with a disability under certain circumstances. The upcoming re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA) is also likely to bring the issue of alternative schools into the limelight.

Listening Session

To plan and prepare for new support from the federal government to encourage development and more widespread use of alternative schools and programs, Secretary Riley sought input from 15 invited participants at a *Listening Session* on December 8, 1998. The invited participants were practitioners, researchers, administrators, policy makers and teacher trainers from across the country who have had significant experience in the area of alternative schools and programs. (A list of the invited participants can be found at the end of this document.)

More than 20 staff members from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice observed this session. Due to Secretary Riley's attendance at Albert Gore, Sr.'s funeral, the session was facilitated by Assistant Secretary Judy Heumann—Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services; Assistant Secretary Kent McGuire—Office of Education, Research and and Rehabilitative Services; Assistant Secretary Kent McGuire—Office of Education, Research andImprovement; and Assistant Secretary Gerald Tirozzi—Office of Elementary and Secondary

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Education. The issues discussed at the Listening Session are summarized below.

Importance of Prevention

Participants emphasized the importance of comprehensive preventive efforts and repeatedly returned to this topic throughout the Listening Session. School systems need to embrace the notion that all children and youth can learn, and efforts need to be made to prevent students from dropping out of school or behaving in way that gets them "kicked out." As one participant stated, "We need to reward schools that are brave enough to address the needs of all students."

Rules, codes of conduct, school climate, and school structure need to be developed with all students in mind. Holding children accountable for their behavior does not excuse a school from being responsible for educating all its students, including those who are expelled. Placing students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) is a model for the whole system. In other words, students should only be removed/separated from the general education environment in rare instances and returned as soon as possible. Pre- and in-service professional development in managing classrooms and addressing behavioral issues is also a critical part of a comprehensive preventive effort. Educators must be prepared to teach an increasingly diverse student body with differing educational and behavioral characteristics. Participants noted that all too often it is student "problem behavior" that leads teachers to abandon their careers in education.

Student body size and overcrowding of schools were two other issues discussed in the context of prevention. Overcrowded, poorly ventilated schools foster problem behavior. But, even if overcrowding is not a problem, the number of students in a school will impact on the school's ability to address individual student needs. It is very difficult to concentrate on individual student needs in a school of more than 1,000 students. Teachers and other staff must work hard to create a supportive educational community in a large school.

Other preventative efforts emphasized were:

- Marketing to the public the importance of addressing the needs of all students through school-wide programs
- High expectations for all students
- Academic support programs beginning in early elementary school
- Flexible scheduling for students
- Involvement of family and community members in school-wide initiatives

Types of Alternative Interventions, Programs and Schools

There must be a continuum of alternative interventions ranging from close monitoring of a student's attendance, to placement in a separate school designed to accommodate students whose behavior interferes with their having a successful experience in school. It is important to note that all alternatives are not separate entities, and a continuum of options prevents inappropriate placement in a segregated setting. Participants emphasized that it was not possible to discuss the myriad of alternative interventions, programs, and schools currently in place around the country, but they generally fall into two categories: *in-school* and *out-of-school alternatives.*

In-school alternatives do not involve removing the student from his/her school. Interventions are implemented on site to address the behavior that is interfering with the learning process. This could be flexible scheduling, truancy monitoring, extra support at transition points (e.g., elementary to middle school), loss of privileges (e.g., all school-work done in one classroom, sometimes referred to as "in-school suspension"), or counseling for the student and his/her family. Support must also be provided for the staff in the form of team meetings, mentors, etc. Holding students accountable for their behavior does not mean that changes should not be made to a student's educational setting that will minimize the chances that the same misbehavior will occur again (e.g., re-scheduling the student's most difficult class for another time of day).

Out-of-school alternatives are appropriate for a very small number of students who are highly disruptive or are dangerous to themselves or others. Alternative schools may be housed in community buildings that are located away from schools. They may also be located on school campuses. Regardless of location, these schools typically have totally different programming, scheduling and faculty than traditional schools.

Characteristics of Effective Alternative Programs and Schools

Effective alternative interventions, programs and schools employ qualified and caring staff who have:

- Specialized education and experience in the areas of preventive strategies and managing challenging behaviors
- Appropriate academic credentials and knowledge of content areas
- A desire to work with the students in these settings

The professionals and paraprofessionals who work in effective alternative programs have on-going staff development, and their salaries are commensurate with the work that they do and with the salaries of other educators. Strong administrative support is also a characteristic of effective interventions, programs and schools. Many principals and other administrators may need professional development in this area.

In regard to alternative programs and schools that are located outside of the student's school of origin, two characteristics of primary importance were identified—small student body and attention to the students' academic progress.

Students who are disruptive and dangerous need the attention of caring educators who "connect" with them as individuals, as do all students. This is easier to accomplish in a setting with few students. Effective alternative programs and schools designate one educator to be responsible for a small number of students and to mobilize the array of resources a student may need to "get back on track." One participant said, "Smaller schools increase the possibility that good things will happen....Students report that what they like about these schools is that the teachers care about them."

Alternative programs and schools cannot serve as "holding tanks." They must have the staff and resources to maintain and, ideally, accelerate the academic progress of their students, in addition to teaching these students the social skills they need to succeed. Students who lose privileges because of weapons violations or disruptive behavior must be expected to make appropriate academic progress. Administrators, teachers and parents must facilitate progress by providing timely feedback, and they must be held accountable for student progress. In practical terms, this means that alternative programs and schools must be credit-focused and help students move towards high school graduation.

Other characteristics include:

- Administrative flexibility regarding rules and policies (e.g., smoking)
- Clearly defined codes of conduct
- Opportunity for students to "time themselves out"
- Interagency and community involvement
- Support for students' transition out of the alternative program
- Well-designed behavioral counseling
- Real-life incentives for students to succeed (e.g., college opportunities, job placement)
- Family involvement

Major Challenges and Barriers

Developing and operating alternative programs and schools presents a variety of significant challenges and barriers, not the least of which is the attitude of the public and educators towards disruptive, violent,and potentially dangerous students. Many citizens want these young people "out of sight" and do not see value in investing in quality alternative educational programs for students who have been suspended or expelled or at-risk for such actions. The pressure on

principals to get these students "out of the school" is tremendous, especially if they have a negative impact on school accountability measures. As one participant expressed, "Youth have been vilified....we need to restore our faith in our own children."

Often, as a result of the attitude described above, existing alternative programs do not have administrative and community support, and operate "on a shoe string" in poor facilities with inadequate educational equipment and materials. Many communities actively oppose the opening of an alternative program or school in their neighborhood. Lack of stability and longevity are common problems for alternative programs and schools because of chronic funding shortages.

It is rare to see a continuum of alternative programs in one school district, unless the district is large. This presents a challenge because students with very different needs may be "dumped" in the same program. For example, students with chronic truancy could be placed with students who are considered dangerous to themselves or others. Related to the issue of placement, is the challenge of ensuring that one specific population of students (e.g., black male students) is not disproportionately represented in a particular alternative program.

Involving family members in alternative programs is a challenge for a variety of reasons. One reason is that the location of such programs may preclude easy access by family members who must use public transportation or rely on transportation from relatives or friends. Also, family perceptions are a barrier if programs or schools are thought to be exclusively "for bad kids." Staff perceptions can also be a barrier. If staff believe that the family does not want to be involved, they may not reach out to family members when it would be beneficial to do so.

Once alternative programs and schools are in operation, staff often resist including students with identified special educational needs, even if that student fits other criteria for the program. One barrier to enrolling students with disabilities is the lack of staff education and experience in the area of special education. In general, recruiting and retaining qualified employees for alternative programs is a major challenge. As discussed above, staff must be knowledgeable in content areas and special education, as well as have the expertise to handle disruptive behavior.

Other significant challenges discussed include:

- Lack of year-round funding
- Inadequate mental health services
- Limited knowledge of how to access Medicaid funds

Indicators of Effectiveness

Participants stressed the need to identify effective alternative interventions, programs and schools; however, the indicators of effectiveness are not immediately obvious. For example, a student who is successful in an alternative school may fail if he returns to his school of origin. Does this mean the alternative school is not effective? Or, does this mean that the alternative setting is the more appropriate one for that student? As one participant explained, "We need to change the notion of what a school should be...[traditional] schools must give up the pretense that they are all things to all students."

Traditional accountability measures may not be appropriate for students who fail in traditional schools. On the other hand, many issues of importance to alternative schools (e.g., student attitude) are not measured because they are difficult to quantify. In addition, there is the problem of accurate and uniform data. For example, if a "drop-out" gets a GED, is he still considered a "drop-out?"

There was general agreement that (1) longitudinal studies are needed to follow students into their mid 20's, (2) individual students and programs should be evaluated, and (3) standard measures of effectiveness do not work. Instead, program evaluators should use methods such as portfolio assessment (or "growth folio assessment"), narrative feedback forms, and attitudinal surveys. One participant cautioned, however, that "Some alternative schools are wonderful in their

uniqueness and must not be standardized." The following indicators were suggested as measures of effectiveness:

For student—

- reduced behavioral incidents (e.g., expulsions)
- increased pro-social behavior (e.g., positive interactions with peers)
- attainment of diploma
- improved attendance
- successful return to school of origin
- completion of educational tasks
- attainment of goals on individualized education program (IEP)
- successful employment experience
- positive interaction with teachers
- academic progress
- long-term planning

For program/school—

- strong academic/instructional program
- students has access to credits for graduation
- interagency and community involvement
- availability of mental health services
- qualified staff
- on-going staff development

Recommendations for Federal Support

Please note that the following recommendations were not prioritized and represent only a summary of the discussion around the topics.

- Continued and enhanced collaboration between the U.S. Department of Education (general and special) and Department of Justice on issues related to alternative interventions, programs and schools.
- National recognition of effective alternative programs and schools (e.g., Blue Ribbon School)
- Federal support for more widespread dissemination of information and research on effective alternative interventions, programs and schools
- Federal funding of alternative programs should be contingent upon the existence of support for students' transition out of program and a corresponding prevention program in the community.
- Federal funding of prevention efforts with the following components:

  ✓ School-wide initiatives
  ✓ Interagency, community and business involvement
  ✓ Continuum of interventions and services
  ✓ Measures of effectiveness
  ✓ Personnel preparation (including administrator level)
  ✓ Inclusion of families in all processes

- Federal support for replication of preservice training models to support teachers interested in working in alternative programs and schools. This may be a certificate program added to a multiple subjects or single subjects credential or a Masters Degree.
- More effective dissemination of information about funding sources for alternative programs and schools (e.g., Charter School and Title I monies)
- Matching Federal grants for alternative programs that represent interagency community collaboratives
- Federal support for the development of software that would facilitate the educational process in alternative programs and improve the management aspects of those programs
- Federal support to convene a nationally representative "think tank" to frame concrete ideas about the definition of "alternative programs" and professional identity in this area

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